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Memo to: Amherst Planning Board  
From: Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director  
Subject: 1 East Pleasant Street and Appropriate Building Scale in Downtown Amherst

At the first public hearing on October 1<sup>st</sup>, a number of citizens expressed concern about the scale and height of the mixed-use building proposed by Archipelago Investments under SPR2015-00003 & SPP2015-00001. These issues of building scale and appropriate development patterns warrant some discussion.

The property at 1 East Pleasant Street is located in Amherst General Business (B-G) District in the Town Center. Under Amherst's Zoning Bylaw, as a result of Town Meeting votes over a period of decades, the Town Center's B-G District is Amherst's densest and most intense mixed-use district. Within that district, a building of five stories that is 55 feet in height is permitted by-right.

#### Change Over Time

The issue of context and contrast have also been raised—some citizens have expressed concern about whether it is appropriate to build a 5 story building right next to and in the midst of much smaller commercial buildings. The answer to that question lies in the community's intentions over time.

The older southern end of the downtown B-G District is typified by buildings that vary from 3, 4, 5, and even 6 stories in height. It has developed over a period of centuries. Its design has always presumed a mix of uses and accommodated pedestrian access, having had much of its development occur before cars existed. The B-G District in the north end of the downtown, in which 1 East Pleasant Street is located, began its commercial development more recently, and so is typified by the 'highway commercial' design assumptions of its principal period of development—between the mid-1940s and the early 1970s. The area contains numerous 1-2 story buildings designed expressly for patrons or customers in cars. The Carriage Shops building itself was originally built in 1962 as a motor lodge (motel).

It is the purpose of planning, and of zoning as a regulatory tool, to anticipate change over time, to project forward the community's needs and intentions, and to consider how the community's regulations can guide, direct, and encourage appropriate change over time in, in this case, Amherst's small but densely-developed downtown business district. That is why the current B-G District regulations deliberately accommodate buildings of up to 5 stories—because Amherst has through its Master Plan process and Town Meeting's subsequent approval of accompanying zoning anticipated the need for redevelopment and infill in under-developed areas of the downtown, including its north end.

Change is never easy, but it is both inevitable and necessary. There is always a first time for something new. Even when it represents long-established community intent, it is rarely comfortable.

The citizens of Amherst argued long and bitterly over construction of the 1889 Town Hall, the tallest building in downtown Amherst. The five-story Ann Whalen Apartments contains 80 units for elderly and disabled residents, and was unprecedented, replacing two existing brick elementary school buildings. The process of its creation took 12 years—from February 1963 (formation of the first Urban Renewal Study Committee) until Feb. 1975 (opening of the building to residents). It was the first building in the Boltwood Walk urban renewal project. The six-story Clark House next door houses 100 units of elderly and disabled residents and low income families. Its creation was challenged in court by abutting neighbors who did not want such a marked change to happen next door. Yet few Amherst residents today would question the value of any of these buildings as essential features of a viable downtown.

### Comparing Northampton's & Amherst's Downtowns

At the October 1<sup>st</sup> public hearing, a resident of the Cottage Street neighborhood noted that buildings in downtown Northampton rarely exceed 4 stories, inferring that additional height of the kind allowed in downtown Amherst was not necessary for a successful downtown. But downtown Northampton is very different than downtown Amherst, and it would be useful to review those differences and their implications with respect to the 1 East Pleasant Street application and the future of downtown Amherst in general.

There are indeed few 5-story buildings in downtown Northampton—the Hotel Northampton, the block housing Essentials/GoBerry/TenThousandVillages across from the courthouse, and the east face (rear) of the Thornes block. For the most part, Northampton's commercial blocks do consist of 3- and 4-story buildings. The differences between these two downtowns that explain why 5-story buildings in downtown Amherst make sense are not about building height itself. They can be understood by comparing: 1) overall land area, 2) existing street patterns, 3) the presence of complete commercial blocks, 4) potential building coverage, and 5) the viability of street corners.

- Land Area & Street Grids - See the two attached aerial maps, which are at the same scale—200' per inch. Streets have been marked to better reveal their grid patterns and the resulting downtown layouts. Most of Amherst's downtown runs along a single north-south spine, with slight east-west extensions. In several places, the downtown area zoned for mixed-uses is only a single streetfront property deep on one or both sides of a street. Northampton's developed downtown covers a much larger land area than does Amherst's downtown, and that broader area includes a more significant grid of several streets.
- Complete Blocks - The grid of streets in downtown Northampton encloses and enables the existence of several complete blocks. All of them are zoned for mixed uses. All of them are lined with commercial or mixed-use buildings, and all allow for interior, centralized parking. The main blocks created by this grid include Main/Strong/Pearl/Pleasant, Main/Pleasant/Hampton/Old South, Main/Center/Masonic, Main/Masonic/Center/State, and Main/Old South/Crafts Avenue. In comparison, the sparse street pattern in Amherst's downtown includes few complete blocks—Boltwood Walk (Main/North Pleasant/Kellogg/Boltwood Walk), the triangle between Pray/East Pleasant/Triangle Streets, and the partially-undeveloped area enclosed by Main/Churchill/Spring/Boltwood Avenue, created by the 2007

rezoning of Spring Street from R-G to B-G. These ‘blocks’ do not individually or collectively possess anything resembling the same area or capacity as the commercial blocks of downtown Northampton.

- Breadth Instead of Height - For these reasons, mixed-use buildings in Northampton’s downtown do not need numerous floors and extensive height in order to grow and be successful. Because there has historically been so much more room, larger properties have been possible on which individual building footprints could occupy more ground area and generate many more square feet of usable space per floor in buildings that are only 3-4 floors tall. In contrast, Amherst’s smaller downtown has meant that, over the years, individual properties started small and progressively became smaller, as numerous businesses tried to utilize a limited supply of land area. It means that possible building footprints are smaller and new development of any size is more difficult. The relative size of buildings shown in the aerial maps of the two downtowns confirms this.
- Street Corners – The benefits of room to grow are particularly pronounced and important at the corners of streets in downtown Northampton, which are more numerous because of the existing grid of public ways. It is at corners where buildings and complete commercial blocks have the ability to grow together over time—Main/Old South, Main/Center, Main/Pleasant, Main/King, Main/Pearl, etc.—to become significant focuses for mixed-use activity. Again, refer to the aerial maps to see where this has occurred.

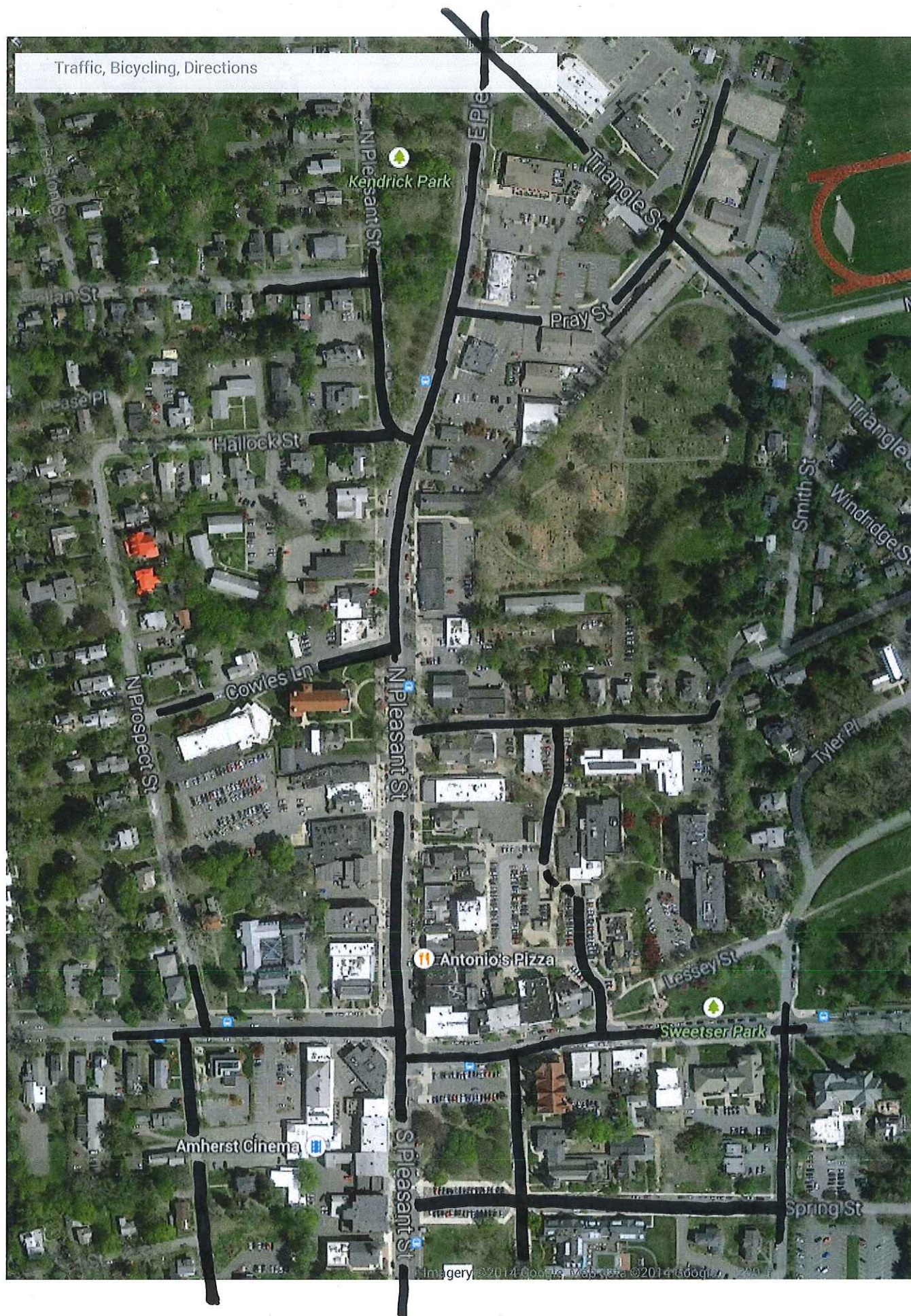
Downtown Amherst has one meaningfully developed corner—the Cook’s Block and its immediately abutting buildings at the northeast corner of the main intersection. The opposite corner is occupied by the Bank of America building, whose only connection to adjacent buildings is a second floor ‘bridge’. There is potential for developed corners in the Pray Street block in the north end of the downtown, but they are as yet undeveloped. Kendrick Place is the first attempt to begin to frame this block with meaningful buildings.

- Public & Institutional Intrusions - Notably, many of the comparatively scarce, potentially useful street corners in downtown Amherst are occupied by non-commercial, non-residential institutional uses—Town Hall, Grace Church, the Police Station, the Unitarian Meetinghouse, the Post Office, St. Brigid’s, etc. Public and institutional uses are critically important to the success of a downtown, but if they occupy too many of an already limited number of strategic areas in which mixed-uses can be successful, those same public and institutional uses can represent a limitation on the ability of a downtown to infill, grow, and prosper. Downtown Amherst suffers from that limitation.

The land area of downtown Amherst is limited compared to that of downtown Northampton. It occupies narrow corridors along only a few streets, usually developed with only one face of mixed-use development on one or two sides of a street. It has very few complete blocks capable of filling in and recombining over time. Building coverage is limited by small lots. Street corners where private buildings might grow together over time are disproportionately ‘claimed’ by public and institutional uses, rather than mixed uses.

Until some of these conditions change, the ways in which downtown Amherst can successfully develop and grow will continue to be limited to filling in and redeveloping under-developed properties, and growing up.

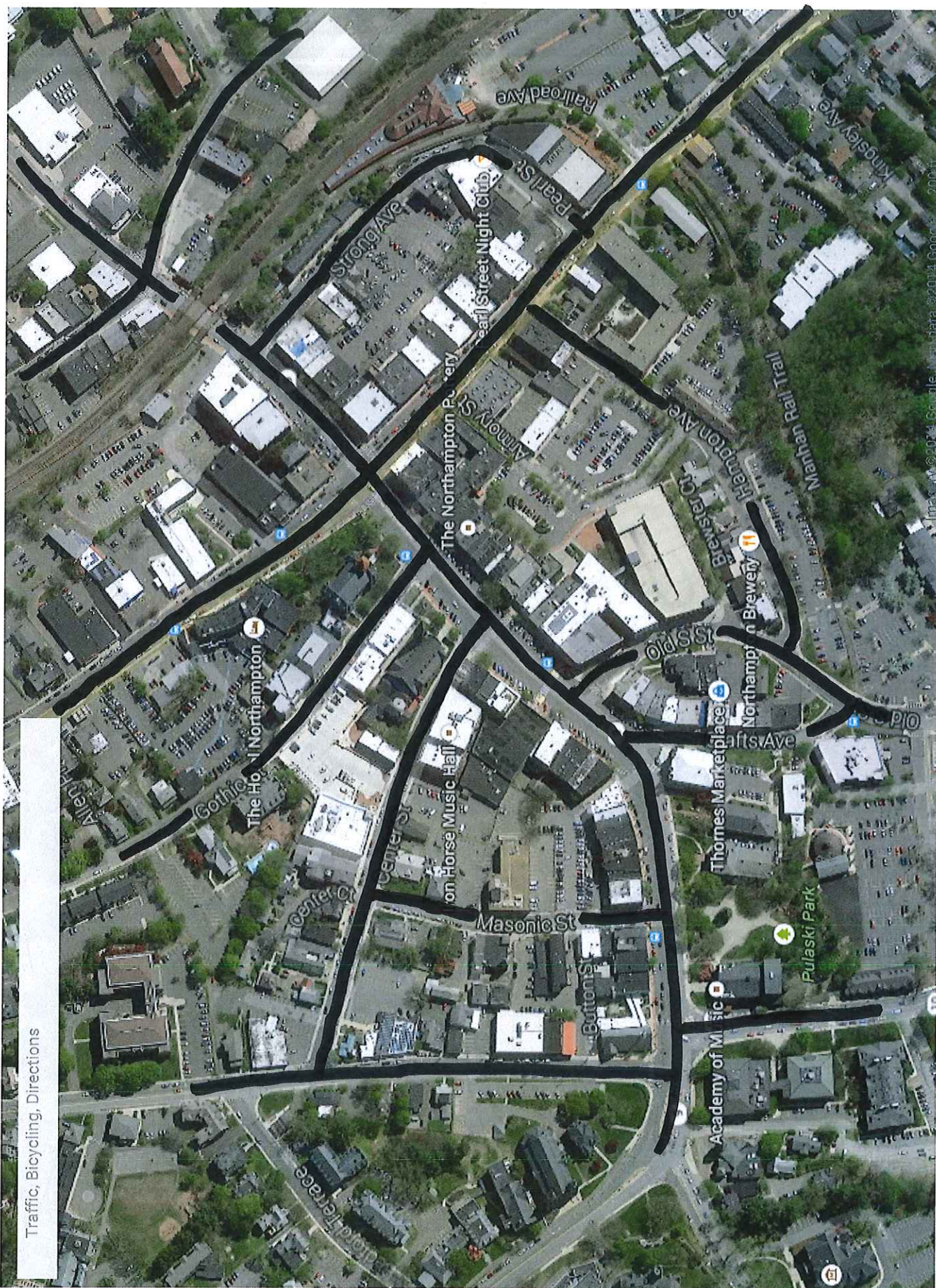






# Downtown Northampton

Traffic, Bicycling, Directions





## Floors and Approximate Heights of Taller Buildings In and Around Amherst Town Center

<u>Building</u>	<u>Number of Floors</u>	<u>Approx. Height</u>	<u>Average Height of Floors</u>
Town Hall	4	66 feet†	16.5 feet
First Cong. Church	NA	64 feet† (north side) 74 feet† (west side)	NA
Clark House (residence-only)	6	57 feet*	9.5 feet
Kendrick Place (as approved)	5	57 feet*	11.4 feet
Ann Whalen Apts.	5	48-52 feet*	9.6-10.4 feet
Boltwood Place	5	49.67 feet*	9.9 feet
Amherst Police Station	3 (north side)	54 feet†	18 feet
Grace Episcopal Church	NA	52 feet† (west entrance)	NA
Bank Block 63-71 South Pleasant	4	52 feet*	13 feet
79 South Pleasant (former Baptist Church)	3	45 feet†	15 feet
Tucker-Taft Building	3	42 feet*	14 feet
St. Brigid's Church	NA	50 feet*	NA
Jones Library	3.5	54 feet†	15.4 feet
Hasting's Block	3	44 feet*	14.7 feet
Cook's Block	3 (south side) 4 (north side)	42 feet* 54 feet*	14 feet 13.5 feet
Lincoln Building	3	43 feet*	14.33 feet
College Hall	NA	52 feet†	NA

† Measured to roof ridge; does not count towers or other projections.

\* Measured to top of streetside parapet (flat roof) unless otherwise noted.